Bodily wreckage, economic salvage and the middle passage: in Sondra Perry's Typhoon coming On

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Bodily Wreckage, Economic Salvage and the Middle Passage in Sondra Perry's Typhoon Coming On (2018)

In Sondra Perry's installation Typhoon Coming On (2018) a digitally manipulated seascape flows around London's Serpentine Sackler gallery. Morphing from a purple ocean to a surging tide of oily, bright beige liquid and accompanied by a soundtrack of distant wails and moans, these wall projections draw the gallery's visitors into the catastrophic seascape of a nineteenth-century abolitionist painting. Perry's video animates a part of J.M.W. Turner's Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On (1840), a painting depicting the Zong massacre of 1781 where the captain of a British slave ship threw 133 enslaved people overboard so that he could 'claim compensation for these "goods" under the salvage clause of the ship's insurance policy' (Yoon 2018: 80). Understood by historians, theorists and artists alike to be a maritime catastrophe that reveals antiblackness and finance capital to be co-constitutive phenomena, the Zong massacre provides both Turner and Perry with the means to contemplate the Atlantic as a site for the transformation of bodily wreckage into economic salvage under the commercial logic of racial capitalism.[{note}]1

While Turner and Perry draw their viewers into this same Atlantic, each composes their seascape through differing treatments of bodies-in-the-water. Turner illustrates the disposal of human life by figuring brown limbs as debris in a tormented sea. Perry, meanwhile, melts Turner's scene into a tranquil surround of endless background where the absence of figural debris calls to the invisibilized state of social violence with which colonial modernity secures its economic futures. In the following discussion, I read Perry's remediation of Turner's painting by thinking about the co-choreography of bodies and ocean in each of these seascapes. Perry's Typhoon, I suggest, is an anti-racist installation that moves its visitors beyond the moral content of Turner's Slave Ship. In her refusal to stage the bodily wreckage of the Middle Passage, she presents the transatlantic slave trade not as an exceptional event punctuating the history of seafaring but as the very foundation of capitalist modernity. This article moves through three parts in an exploration of that argument about Perry's dispersal of wreckage: first, a consideration of what it means for Perry, as an African American artist whose work animates ideas about antiblackness and Black

liberation, to project the Atlantic onto the walls of the Serpentine; second, a discussion of the racial and bodily problematics of Turner's original painting; and third, drawing in part from my own experiences of wandering through this show as a white British visitor, an exploration of Perry's installation as a kind of choreographic practice at work against a European-colonial conception of the human.

The Atlantic in the Serpentine

'I'm interested in thinking about how blackness shifts, morphs, and embodies technology to combat oppression and surveillance throughout the diaspora', Perry has said of her practice. In response to these conditions of oppression and surveillance, she continues, 'blackness is agile' (Perry in Obrist and Peel 2018: 15). 'Agility' here can be taken to describe forms of corporeality through which Black subjects elude the capture of white attention: states in which Perry's show is invested at the level of its visual, sonic and kinetic materials. Her interest in agility is manifested fundamentally in the shape-shifting nature of the way her show inhabits the Serpentine Sackler building's original structure.[{note}]2 The framing work is the video mentioned above: a large-scale, wrap-around projection where a digital ocean courses along the gallery's wide inside corridor, emitting what Nora N. Khan has called a 'soundtrack of abyssal yawns' (Khan 2018: 22). Inside the two inner chambers of the building are three mixed-media works. TK (Suspicious Glorious Absence) (2018) consists of a wall projection showing an undulant, extreme close-up of Perry's skin as well as a smaller a monitor playing 'footage of body cams, protests and the artist's family' along with a recording of Eartha Kitt's 'I Want to Be Evil' (Obrist and Peel 2018: 16). Placed in the second chamber are two iterations of Perry's 'workstations'. One of these, Wet and Wavy – Typhon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation (2016) is a precursor to the wrap-around Typhoon. A rowing machine whose water chamber is filled with gloopy hair gel, this workstation includes a triptych of screens showing Perry's morphing seascape with an audio mix of 'Tibetan healing sounds' and a distorted track by Missy Elliot (Perry 2016). Although the sounds from the workstations are isolated via headphones, the sound from TK and Typhoon are not, so echoes of one piece follow visitors as they move onto the next. This creates a situation, along with the open sightlines and the encouragement that visitors climb into and work out on the exercise machines, in which our optic and aural attention is invited to slide across multiple pieces and in which our bodies, too, are brought into states of postural awkwardness: experiences of compromised movement to which I shall return later in my discussion of the mutuality in this show of agility and precarity.

For now, though, Perry's interest in agility as a property particularly of Black experience and of the radical potentials of diasporic cultural production is brought into relief by the setting of this show in an architecture that lends a loaded background to this work about the Middle Passage. Perry has explained of the geographical implications of her London show:

> The Turner painting was first shown at the Royal Academy, which creates this emphasis here in the UK. But also, there's a really funny YouTuber I follow called 'Evelyn From the Internets' who was here for a conference recently and she was like, 'I'm here, in the Coloniser's land…' and that's really how I feel. It's almost a homecoming for this thing that's been morphed and twisted. I am a Black American, and […] I am always trying to make work with the diaspora in mind and to think historically -- you have to in order to understand what Blackness is and what Blackness means.
>
> (Perry in Clarke-Brown, 2018)

Perry's quotation of Evelyn From the Internets on the coloniality of British land points to the significance of the exhibition site. At the Serpentine Sackler in Hyde Park, Perry's projections flow along the walls of a building made originally to store gunpowder. The Magazine (as the building is still called) was acquired by Serpentine Galleries in 2012 and renovated with a new extension by Zaha Hadid. It was originally erected, though, in 1805 by the Board of Ordnance as a storehouse to provide increased armory to the British military at a crucial point in the Napoleonic Wars and supply gunpowder 'on the occasions of drill and reviews in Hyde Park' (Historic England, 2019). The distinctive structure of the gallery -- its outer corridor and inner chambers -- pertains to its function as a store for chemical explosives. This building, so vitally a part of Perry's seascape, holds in its walls the histories of British military power and pageantry. The architecture, though, is also haunted by the more specific imperial histories of Britain's participation in the trading of Black lives, for gunpowder is a substance that both powered British conquest overseas and was 'an essential trading commodity of the transatlantic slave trade' (Cocroft 2000: 16). The commodity, in other words, for whose protection The Magazine was designed, was once traded by British merchants for African people and so sustained the very histories of dehumanization to which Perry's reading of Turner is attuned.

Without referring to the military-industrial history of The Magazine itself, Typhoon demands that we pay attention to the ongoing histories of colonial dominion and anti-colonial resistance that continue to pervade economic, social, and cultural infrastructures built on the spoils of slavery. When Perry projects a 'morphed and twisted' version of Turner's sea and of her own skin onto these walls, she summons in the very materials of the building those colonial histories

of the Atlantic. She does this by articulating the histories and futures of the Middle Passage while refusing to depict any kind of wreckage that would represent the aftermath of that catastrophe. If wreckage can be made to perform as trace of a disaster that has passed, then Perry's work positions the Middle Passage in the perpetually unfolding present, as a watery space in which the structural violence and cultures of liberation born in the Black Atlantic are continually played out. In this way, her work moves in dialogue with concepts developed by theorists of race including Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten and Édouard Glissant, each who take up a language of spatiotemporal dispersal to describe the global economies and afterlives of the transatlantic slave trade. Dispersal becomes for these theorists, as it does for Perry, an epistemology of colonial modernity: a refusal to confine the Middle Passage to history conceived as a place and period of the past and instead a way of knowing that passage to be now and everywhere, foundational and persistent. Such an epistemology sees the Middle Passage dispersed through the present: present still in the walls of structures like The Magazine and in the Atlantic itself as a space that cannot hold the wreckage of a disaster that is not yet over.

Wreckage is cleared from Perry's installation in a way that chimes with the work of the theorists mentioned above through two kinds of dispersal that operate choreographically, which is to say, they attend both to the movement of bodies and to the dialectical interplay of space and time.[{note}]3 First, by evacuating Turner's painted sea of its bodies and wrapping that Atlantic instead around the bodies of the Serpentine's visitors, Perry stages a dispersal of historical time. Here the catastrophe of the Middle Passage is presented not as a singular and bounded event belonging to the past but instead as a surrounding and ongoing present: as a ground of global modernity that cannot leave debris for, as ground, it is still here.[{note}]4 This is the kind of temporal dispersal to which Sharpe refers when she defines transatlantic slavery through Maurice Blanchot's conception of disaster as imminence. Perry's work animates Sharpe's sense that the disaster of the slave trade is 'deeply atemporal', which is to say, following Blanchot, that as disaster it "'ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact'" (Sharpe, and Blanchot in Sharpe 2016, 5). This is the same kind of dispersal, too, to which Moten refers when he turns to the work of Hartman in defining that same history of 'captivity and enslavement' not as an event but as 'durational field' (Moten 2017: xii). In all these theoretical reckonings with history's incomplete and incompletable traumas, and in Perry's presentation of the Zong massacre through seascape surround, there can be no wreckage to index the event of destruction because destruction is ongoing: it is not occurrence but imminence, not event but durational field, not

the before or after of abolition and emancipation but the ongoing condition of racial capitalism constituting the (after)lives of slavery.

Second, through her decision to make human bodies melt into and move around her work, Perry stages a dispersal of social space so that the individuals who spend time in the gallery are brought out of autonomy and into a relational field. Perry does not show any stable human form in the moving images projected onto the walls but instead produces a mutuality of sea and body where one cannot be fully distinguished from the other. And while no figurative bodies appear in these images, Perry also produces an embodied mutuality for the people who enter her exhibition: she choreographs an experience which is, as she explains it, 'an experience that you cannot have fully without having an understanding of where somebody else is literally standing' (Perry in Clarke-Brown, 2018). It is here that Perry's Typhoon stages its second kind of dispersal by taking up something close to philosopher Glissant's 'poetics of relation'. Articulated in Glissant's call that his readers imagine the 'nonworld' of the Middle Passage as the birthplace of a diasporic collectivity, this poetics describes a way of sensing one's relational place in history and so of knowing oneself 'as part and as crowd' (Glissant 1997: 9). By thinking in the wake of the Middle Passage, Glissant models an understanding of (social) space as field of relations that chimes with Hartman's and Moten's understanding of history as durational field: where one's position in space is no more detached from another's position as the moment of disaster is detached from that disaster's persistence. Glissant's, in other words, is a kind of sociology of dispersal revealing how 'each and every identity is extended through a relationship with Other' (1997: 11). In Perry's installation, this mode of knowing self as/through Other is granted not only to those who might visit her show knowing themselves to be part of Glissant's African-diasporic 'we': those who, as 'the descendants' of that fertile nonworld, are made 'one people among others' (1997: 8). But also, and as I will come to argue in the final part of my article, Perry's experiential poetics of relation is gifted to all those who enter the Serpentine, which is to say to all those who have inherited the world shaped through the economies of the Atlantic and so who must know themselves by 'having an understanding of where someone else is standing' in that ocean's socioeconomic field of inheritance.

It is through its dispersals of historical time into durational field and of individual autonomy into spatial (and ontological and socioeconomic) relationality, that Perry's work creates an Atlantic free from debris and so stages the Middle Passage as ongoing present in which all are invested: as a harbour for structural racism and for forms of Black agility too. As Sharpe asks: 'how does one

memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still?' (Sharpe 2016: 20). Perry's Typhoon offers an answer through its dispersal of wreckage from the scene of maritime disaster. It is the choreographic modalities of Perry's dual (temporal and spatial) dispersal that motivate this enquiry and that will be unpacked in what follows. The aesthetic seeds of her dispersals are first to be found in Turner's painting of 1840, which prefaces her treatment of the Zong massacre as a catastrophe still unfolding.

J.M.W. Turner's wrecked bodies

Turner's painting is commonly understood to be a depiction of the massacre that took place during the voyage of the British slaving ship Zong: an event as crucial to the history of British abolitionism as it was to the birth of finance capitalism.[{note}]5 As Ian Baucom has shown, the legal trial following this incident ruled that the murder of those 133 drowned people be understood not as a loss not of human life but as a loss of speculative, financial value legally recuperable from the voyage's underwriters, and so the trial both defined slaves 'as commodities that have become the subject of insurance' and drew the British public's attention to the dehumanizing operations of the slaving economy writ large (Baucom 2005: 139). It was to this same event that Turner was drawn, suggests Baucom, while 'searching for a subject for a painting to exhibit in parallel with the 1840 opening of the inaugural World Anti-Slavery Convention' (2005: 267--7).[{note}]6 Perry's response to Turner's painting can be viewed through the latter's creation of a scene primed to engage the sensibilities (guilt and morality not least of all) of a contemporary white, pro-abolition audience. Such an appeal, I argue, can be located in what art historian Leo Costello has convincingly described as the painting's tendency to operate at an 'un-resolvable limit of representation', which is to say, its handling of the very unsayability of the horrors of the Middle Passage (Costello 2012: 204). The painting's limit of representation is tested first in its creation of a visual world giving no optic stability to its viewer and second through its grappling with the problems of representing the bodies of drowning slaves. Together, these elements set up a frame for understanding both Perry's inheritance of Turner's work at the limit of representation and her critique of the figure of the human produced in the wreckage of his Atlantic.

Like Perry's Typhoon, Turner's Slave Ship mobilizes the sea so that it submerges the viewer's attention. Most of the painting is composed of indistinct brushstrokes pronouncing a whirling sunset sky and a swelling brown-beige sea, with space reserved in the middle left of the frame for

a ship crashing on the waves and in the lower right for a gathering of vague figures including fish, seabirds, and a sinking human leg with chain around the ankle. Moving with force around these nebulous figures, the sea and sky consume the scene, churning an elemental confusion of water and air and agitating against the settlement of the gaze. Costello observes that Turner's seascape 'strip[s] the space of any possible place of rest and safety for the eye' and so that 'the viewer is drawn into the terrible scene, in which the overwhelming natural forces carry also a moral content' (Costello 2012: 221). To put it another way: in animating the sea within the picture frame Turner brings his viewer imaginatively into the Middle Passage and so places them in a position of moral responsibility vis-à-vis his painting's catastrophic content. That call to moral responsibility spoke particularly to a London audience of 1840, which was primed to view the painting through the lens of the parallel anti-slavery convention. In the light of its originating exhibition context, the painting's depiction of a sea that draws its viewers inside implies Turner's refusal to rescue those viewers from a feeling of complicity in a national economy still bankrolled by colonial ventures, and his refutation, too, of the utopian concept of abolition's 'after', of a national future absolved of guilt. That sinking leg, though, underscores the ways in which white guilt comes to operate at the very foundation of Turner's limit of representation and is the part of this painting to which Perry's exhibition addresses its strongest critique. Slave Ship retains at its moral core a graphic image of the slave's wrecked body, which in turn betrays what Baucom has termed Turner's 'liberal cosmopolitanism': a position permitting the painting's white viewers to secure their purchase on the category of the human by grounding their morality in the act of witnessing Black suffering (Baucom 2005: 296).

The only trace of human form in Slave Ship is that one sinking leg, painted brown and, more faintly in the brushstrokes, made to extend from the body of a 'naked, upside-down woman' (McCoubrey 1998: 338). Of this body we are shown only parts: one leg; a semi-submerged torso; and two breasts. The remainder of her body is gone, submerged in the ocean (or consumed by the swarming creatures) and disappearing into the representational abyss beneath the frame. This, in short, is a body wrecked: the left-behind pieces of a life stolen long before the event of drowning. To borrow a phrase from Hortense Spillers, in this incomplete figure can be glimpsed 'the seared, divided, ripped-apartness' of Black flesh, a kind of physiological and social wreckage enacted through captivity and enslavement (Spillers 1987: 67). But what to make of this ripped-apart body? Costello suggests that Turner's 'incomplete imagery' aligns with his broader presentation of the very unsayability of the scene it figures: that in this human fragment, Turner reveals his reluctance to 'incorporate [the woman fully] into the space of representation where

she would become an exchange value' (2012: 209). The incomplete image, in other words, projects Turner's critique of the logic by which human lives are rendered as commodity. The painting's critique of body-as-exchange value, though, is undermined by its presentation of body-as-wreckage.

In her poetry cycle Zong! (2008), which reconstitutes the legal language of the Zong insurance trial, M. NourbeSe Philip imagines that notorious ship's Manifest and includes in it a category 'Body Parts', listing:

> arm
> bras
> cunt
> ear
> eye
> feet
> [and so on]
>
> (Philip 2008: 185)

Splitting the body into the parts through which its labour potential might be evaluated on the slave market, Philip's imagined Manifest makes clear the impossible bind of Turner's decision to paint the bodily wreckage of the Atlantic. While Slave Ship does prefigure Perry's installation as a work about the impossibility of its subject's representation -- by testing the limit of a story, in Philip's words, 'that can only be told by not telling' -- Turner ultimately also concedes to anxieties of the white abolitionist frame by producing an image of the Black female form in pieces (Philip 2008: 194). In so doing he both emblematizes 'the seared, divided, ripped-apartness' of captive flesh and performs the urge to objectify Black suffering by imagining the bodily disintegration of a person he categorically is not: an enslaved woman. It is in this problem of Turner's apprehensive figurative language, I suggest, that we might locate Baucom's critique of the painting's liberal cosmopolitanism, through which 'Turner invites us to watch, sympathize, and then move on, to compose ourselves… as an effect of the idea of our witness to the sufferings of another' (Baucom 2005, 296, my emphasis). Here, in other words, the representation of bodily wreckage serves to assuage the guilt of liberal abolitionism by permitting the viewer to compose their morality through bearing witness to the decomposition of a subject who is deprived of her humanity and so made categorically 'other'.[{note}]7

'But what else could Turner have done?', asks Costello of Turner's impossible bind (2012: 226). Answers appear not only in Philip's poetry, which rips and reconstitutes Zong's legal trial, but also in Perry's digital Atlantic stripped of its bodies. By dispersing wreckage from her Atlantic,

Perry converts the representation of an event's aftermath into an experience of the disaster's imminence. Her installation does what Turner's painting did not: it makes the Black bodies immersed in the histories of the Middle Passage into fleeting but deeply material forms of agility who by various means elude the capture of the liberal cosmopolitan gaze. 'When I use that painting in my work', Perry explains, 'I edit out the bodies, because you don't need them when you're the body in the ocean' (Perry in Coatman 2018). Though she remediates Turner's Slave Ship into a seascape without figures, there are bodies all over Perry's show: in the soft cacophony of voices floating through the main corridor; in the image of her skin dissolved in TK's wall projection; and in the movement of the gallery's visitors. In each of these registers of embodiment Perry resists the representational capture of Black subjects retained in Turner's dissected figures and shows how all who enter her exhibition are already submerged in the catastrophic histories it takes as its subject. In the final part of my article, I explore each of these registers, thinking through the ways in which Perry invites her viewers, as bodies dispersed through this Atlantic in the Serpentine, to contemplate their inextricable and racially differentiated involvement in the imminent disasters of that ocean.

'when you're the body in the ocean': Perry's sea without wreckage

Reflecting on the queer literary textures of Dionne Brand's A Map to the Door of No Return (2001) -- a work of historical fiction tuned to the Black ancestries of the Middle Passage -- Omise'eke Tinsley has suggested that 'the subaltern can speak in submarine space, but it is hard to hear her or his underwater voice, whispering… a thousand secrets that at once wash closer and remain opaque, resisting closure' (Tinsley 2008: 194). Tinsely could equally be describing the aurality of Perry's Typhoon, which drenches its main corridor with the light of morphing waters and the sounds of abyssal yawns. This soundscape seems to issue from the depths of the Atlantic as a chorus both howling and muted, one which neither speaks discernable words nor preserves the discreteness of individual voice: a subaquatic one-made-many. With this choral swell, Perry makes room for the sounds of those lost to the Middle Passage. In this, she seems to respond to Philip's confession that 'I have often… wondered whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater' (Philip 2008: 203). By sounding those echoes, Perry invites her visitors to stay experientially with the people her exhibition most closely memorializes, to hear the buried voices of the Atlantic even as we step away from its image: an experience of 'staying with' that refutes Turner's invitation for his viewers to 'watch, sympathize, and then move on'. In this sense, Perry also practices something akin to what Boaventura de

Sousa Santos has termed a 'sociology of absences': a sensuous practice of knowing against -- and knowing beneath -- the 'abyssal exclusion[s]' of Global North epistemologies, conveying instead the 'inaudible voices' of colonial histories into sonic presence (de Sousa Santos, 2018: 15, 177). It is important to note, though, that unlike the figural hints of lost humanity retained in Turner's devastating scene, the voices given here do not stand exactly for wreckage. This chorus does not depict the sonic ruins of lives expended but implies the sounds of a continued relational living, one enunciating Glissant's 'nonworld' as the birthplace of a diasporic collectivity and remaining, nevertheless, opaque in the face of a sympathetic witness (and whiteness).

With the skin wall of TK, Perry continues to smuggle bodily materiality into her non-figurative work and materializes also her interest in Black agility. The projection fills an internal wall with an oozing landscape of what looks like molten flesh: in fact an ultra-magnified slow-moving image of Perry's skin. Of 'skin-work' made by artists of colour, Prarthana Purkayastha has asked, 'what about the pain of inhabiting skin that can never escape being marked Other, that derives its meaning from Whiteness, and that is constantly marked and punctured by the colonial and orientalist gaze?" (Purkayastha 2015: 119). Working with the Fanonian idea that colonial racism is both concealed and naturalized in an epidermal logic, Purkayastha makes a compelling point about experiences of exposing one's skin when one's skin is not read as white. Perry is acutely aware of this problem and has spoken of the aesthetic agility through which she, as a Black woman, makes images with her skin that refuse the puncture of white attention. She explains: 'the idea of humanness is fundamentally an illusion, and in order to avoid white normativity, I prefer to disassemble my own body [by] 'tak[ing] my skin, reanimate[ing] it into fluid waves' (Perry in Daderko 2017). Read against Turner's image of the woman entering the sea, Perry's skin wall disperses her corporeal solidity in a strategic aversion of the sympathetic-voyeuristic gaze through which the viewer might compose their morality in an apprehension of her flesh.

That optical puncture is eluded further as Perry melts the image of her skin into an elemental mix where her body occupies a state somewhere between water and fire. Soyoung Yoon has described this effect alongside that of Turner's beige-brown Atlantic: 'sea-as-flesh, flesh-as-sea'; and Perry has described it as 'something that feels like it's burning alive' (Yoon 2018: 82; Perry in Serpentine Galleries, 2018). The transformation of this part of the artist's body into either fluid or energy (undulating ocean or blazing heat) categorically refuses the kind of arrest to which the body of Turner's Slave Ship is subjected. Spillers again offers insight on the relationship between bodily dissection, racialization, and the subjection of the enslaved's flesh to scientific attention.

She writes that 'the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory' (Spillers 1987: 68). In transforming the Serpentine wall into her own living laboratory, one on which she displays her skin as alchemic element -- organ-as-ocean-as-fire -- Perry disperses the same puncturing gaze invited by Turner's depiction of brown limb, torso, and breasts, by the anatomical register of the slave ship inventory, and by the optic regimes of colonial medicine, recasting her body instead as elemental agility. The kinds of colonial procedures to which Spillers refers, in other words, are imaginatively reconstituted in Perry's dissolution of her body, as her molten skin becomes not so much object arrested for inspection as fugitive, vital substance.

A final register of embodiment through which Perry employs an agile poetics of relation is that of the choreographic experiences of the gallery's visitors. My experience of the exhibition is that it did create an environment where 'you're the body in the ocean'. This is not to say as visitors we become immersed in this environment simply because we have the chance to wander through it. Royona Mitra has already shown the problems of conceptualizing immersion simply through audience mobility and choice (Mitra 2016). With Mitra's crucial intervention in mind, I suggest that Perry's environment immerses its visitors in her digital Atlantic not because we can choose how to move around it (a feature of most all visual art exhibitions) but because of the unavoidable relationality it creates between those who do. As Tamar Clarke-Brown observes: 'Walking around the exhibition, […you become] keenly aware of yourself, adrift in the space. What's here is you. And as you turn your head, there is another body…" (Clarke-Brown 2018). In this space I sensed the same. The wide corridor of the Serpentine, drenched as it was in light and sound, was transformed into a total field into which we who passed along were positioned as the only population adrift in this abyssal seascape. The wrap-around sea cleared of all wreckage made for that sensation of becoming a plural 'you' whose differential relationships to the ancestries of the Middle Passage are washed up against the walls of the building.

Indeed, as a white British visitor to the exhibition in that former gunpowder store in this former centre of empire, my feeling of being engulfed by Perry's digital ocean drew my attention to my spatial position inside Turner's seascape and so too, unavoidably, to my social position in the Atlantic's socioeconomic field of inheritance: a position guaranteed by precisely the same brutal illusion -- the European-colonial category of the human -- that is melted away in Perry's skin wall in the gallery's neighbouring chamber. Sylvia Wynter has shown how this category of the human

emerged through and naturalized both "'the rise of Europe" with its construction of the "world civilization"' and 'African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation"' (Wynter, 2003: 263). When Perry clears away figurations of Black suffering through which her white visitors might bear sympathetic witness to the horrors of the Middle Passage, she offers a critique of Turner's appeal to the white morality of abolitionism and in so doing enunciates a multi-sensory version of Wynter's critique of liberalism's 'human'. But not all visitors to Perry's exhibition, of course, are white. Working through Glissant's idea of 'one people among others', the experience of an aural, transhistoric solidarity is certainly possible for those who might listen to Perry's soundscape in relation to sensations of diasporic ancestry. But, and this is the point: no matter their position in the Atlantic's field of socioeconomic inheritance, a visitor to Typhoon Coming On has their position in the field of the image thrown into relief and so are brought into mutuality with all others in that field – a poetics of relation made up of voices of the past and bodies in the present. Where Turner permitted his viewers to turn sympathetically away from a decomposed figure made other, producing in its dehumanized otherness a reserve of morality with which the liberal subject may in turn compose itself as 'human', Perry's viewers cannot separate themselves from the catastrophic scene nor the violent discourses of humanity harboured in and made to justify slave economies. Inside her Typhoon, in other words, visitors might sense their bodies (being seen as) figures washed up against the Middle Passage and so find themselves immersed in that catastrophe as they are by the social futures it has underwritten.

Conclusion

By its dialogue with Turner's sea and its critique of his depiction of the slave ship's bodily wreckage, Perry's installation remediates the scene of the Zong massacre around the whispered presences of Black liberation. In this she enacts the kinds of dispersals which I described above as constituting an epistemology of colonial modernity: a way of knowing the Middle Passage where historical time is dispersed into durational field, individual autonomy dispersed into spatial (and ontological and socioeconomic) relationality and, crucially, where Black corporeality is dispersed in an evasion of capture by the racializing apparatus of liberal humanism. Where TK stages an elemental consumption of the artist's skin, denying the bodily puncture of the (sympathetic-voyeuristic) colonial gaze, and Typhoon consumes its viewers with sound and light, immersing them in the living ancestries of the Atlantic, workstations such as Wet and Wavy's ergometer offer the visitor an experience of 'going inside the body of [a machine]… in order to have a conversation with [it]' and to sense themselves in the contemporary economies fueled by

a continued exploitation of labouring bodies (Perry in Serpentine Galleries, 2018). By way of conclusion, I suggest that this land-locked vessel distills both Perry's invitation that her viewers reflect on their position in racial capitalism and the potentialities her show articulates for practices of Black agility.

Commonly used to build power endurance in sport or improve health and appearance in fitness industries, the rowing machine is adapted by Perry in order to problematize 'what it means to be productive' (Perry in Serpentine Galleries, 2018). The machine is equipped with screens showing small-scale versions of the corridor oceans while the sound -- part soothing chimes, part interdimensional robot -- plays through headphones. Having climbed into the machine and once settled with these stimuli, the visitor has the choice to row: an act that takes unusual effort because of the sticky hair gel placed in the mechanism's water chamber, increasing its ergonomic resistance. This souped-up machine is also rickety: affixed with large appendages and attached to multiple cables which droop like so many awkward tentacles out of its body. Indeed, it is difficult to use Perry's workstations without getting stuck, be it against the too-close screens, in one's kinetic struggle with the clogged mechanism, or by getting tangled in the cables. Perry has spoken about this very aspect of the ergometer, observing that 'it's an incredibly precarious machine' and that 'it also reminds me of the precarity of my body' (Serpentine Galleries, 2018). Her reflection is related, via the twinned problems of labour productivity and racialized bodily precarity securing the economies of capitalist modernity, to her interest in making an exhibition of digital images that conjure the Middle Passage. 'We don't have to reinvent the wheel when we're talking about labor and exploitation inside of the digital realm', she says, 'because it's a similar relationship when we're talking about people being moved over oceans in order to become labor sources' (Serpentine Galleries, 2018). And so, in this precarious work-out machine that confronts its users with image-sounds of an abyssal Atlantic and the instabilities of bodily work, Perry offers her visitors another intensively embodied experience through which to sense their suspension within a field of differential social relations where bodily efficiency, labour exploitation, and racial violence continue to coalesce in the wake of transatlantic slavery.

Perry's thoughts on her rickety ergometer and the forms of exploitation to which it gestures, though, prompt a question: what is the relationship in this exhibition between agility and precarity? While in TK Perry animates her flesh into an elemental fugitivity that swerves white attention and liquifies the military-industrial histories embedded in the walls of building, she also uses this building to display machines whose design calls to the precarity of her material

existence as a Black woman in the early twenty-first century. The artist, in other words, does not conflate practices of liberation with an ontology of freedom and so frames agility not as an escape from structural racism but as that which permits ongoing collective struggle bringing contemporary acts of Black liberation into the durational field of the Middle Passage. Indeed, reflecting on the Zong incident, Perry recalls 'stories that enslaved people threw themselves overboard in protest' and finds in these stories 'what it is to be in a liberatory state', which is 'not about freedom… but about… being in liberation' (Serpentine Galleries, 2018). As an exhibition that explores states of liberation without arresting Black bodies into emblems either of suffering or, crucially, of a freedom that would consecrate what Hartman calls 'the nonevent of emancipation', Perry shows the imminence of racial capitalism (a disaster that ruins everything while leaving everything intact) and of diasporic states of transhistoric struggle (Hartman 1997: 62). Where Turner's Slave Ship ultimately invites what Baucom calls a virtuoso disinterestedness in the face of the Middle Passage, a disinterestedness through which we can compose ourselves through our witness to the sufferings of another, Perry's Typhoon invites us to move within and, vitally, in precarious relation to image, machine, and each other, calling us to decompose ourselves so that our interest is submerged in the relational poetics of the work and its world.

Notes

1 For representative instances of such framings of the Zong incident see: Baucom (2005); Philip (2008); and Sharpe (2016).

2 Perry's exhibition inhabits the square architecture of the original building but not Zaha Hadid's undulating extension of 2012.

3 See Stanger (2016) for a discussion of this interplay as a defining feature of 'choreography'. For a history of the shifting definition of that term, see Foster (2011: 15--72).

4 Hartman has shown that 'the slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body' (1997: 62). My discussion of Perry's work is indebted to the model developed by Hartman for thinking about the 'afterlives' of slavery.

5 For a summary of the incident and its ensuing trial, see Philip (2008: 189). The painting's historical subject is debated by Costello (2012), who draws on existing arguments that the subject of Turner's painting was a later historical phenomenon: that of pursuit and jettison after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. Costello claims that the painting delivers a dialectical

view of history that wraps both events (one pre- and the other post-abolition) into the same seascape to 'show how the evils of slave trade persisted' long after 1807 (2012: 214).

6 For a discussion of the painting's history in relation to the abolitionist context, see McCoubrey (1998).

7 This problem of bearing witness to Black suffering as strategy for moral self-composition is in some ways the inverse to that problem articulated by Hartman when she asks: 'how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other?' (1997: 4).

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